

The Impact of Open Discussion Sessions on Enhancing the Oral Communicative Abilities of Saudi English Language Majors at Buraydah Community College

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Abstract

The importance of developing the communicative needs of English language majors has been found a fundamental concern of Buraydah Community college in Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. The aim of this study has been to identify English language speaking skill needs of English language majors and investigate the impact of using Open Discussion Sessions, as extracurricular speaking activities, on developing students' oral communicative abilities. Thirty-five students and eleven English language teachers participated in the study. Data were collected quantitatively and qualitatively by means of survey questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and pre-post speaking test. Both descriptive and inferential statistics were employed in analyzing the raw data collected. The results of the study exposed a perceived need for developing Saudi EFL students' speaking skill in English as their oral communicative abilities dramatically increased for their needs and interests were clearly identified and the methods for fulfilling those needs were more innovative. Post-test speaking results revealed significant development in students' speaking abilities due to the use of Open Discussion Sessions that provided a relaxed learning environment void of worry and enhanced learners' self-confidence through active involvement with real communicative situations with other students as well as with the instructors. Finally this study provided a framework with techniques and procedures that helped teachers to teach speaking skill more efficiently. Suggestions focused on incorporating Social Network Sites and visual cues to enhance students' interactivity and participation outside the college borders.

Keywords: EFL, extracurricular activities, open discussion sessions, oral communication, speaking skill

1. Introduction

English has touched increasing importance throughout the world in general and in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in particular. While some Arab students, like Emirates, have regular contact with English-speaking immigrants in the neighborhoods or English speaking tourists who come to their cities, few Saudis live in direct contact with English speaking communities. In addition, Saudi government schools do not have English native or near native –speaking teachers at all. All these conditions make English speaking, as a significant oral productive skill, more difficult for most Saudi students.

Ur (1996) considered speaking as the most important skill among four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) because people who know a language are referred to as speakers of that language. This indicates that using a language is more important than just knowing about it because there is no point knowing a lot about a language if you can't use it (Scrivener, 2005). In line with this point of view, Willis (1996) claimed that for language learning to take place, there are four conditions that should exist. These are the exposure, opportunities to use the language, motivation, and instruction.—Learners need chances to say what they think or feel and to experiment in a supportive atmosphere using language they have heard or seen without feeling threatened. Littlewood (1984) believed that a fact that is highlighted by second language research is that progress does not occur when people make a conscious effort to learn. Progress occurs as a result of spontaneous, subconscious mechanisms, which are activated when learners are involved in communication with the second language. The subconscious element demands a new range of activities, where learners are focused not on the language itself but on the communication of meaning. Therefore, language teaching activities in the classroom should aim at

improving the oral production of the students and accordingly developing their language use (Haozhang, 1997). However, oral communication instruction is ignored because of the delusion that oral communication competence develops naturally over time and that the cognitive skills involved in writing automatically transfer to analogous oral communication skills (Chaney, 1998).

Mennaai (2013), Zhang (2009) and Somsai & Intaraprasert (2011) argued that speaking remains the most difficult skill to master for the majority of English learners, and they are still incompetent in communicating orally in English. In his endeavors to analyze the factors that cause speaking difficulties to EFL Learners. Al-Abri (2008) added that the lack of oral activities in textbooks is a strong reason for students' difficulties in speaking, and thus he recommended including some oral activities in the form of songs, rhymes, and simple stories and more conversational language to enable students to have more fun and enjoy learning to improve their speaking skill. In addition, Dil (2009) reported that anxiety and unwillingness during the English speaking process are considered two of the biggest obstacles for EFL learners. Anxiety and unwillingness are caused by the fear of being negatively evaluated when making mistakes, particularly in front of their friends. Rababa'h (2005) pointed out that there are many factors that cause difficulties in speaking English among EFL learners. Some of these factors are related to the learners themselves, the teaching strategies, and the curriculum, the lack of a target language environment and the lack of involvement in real-life situations. Not allowing learners to participate in discourse can also be another reason for speaking difficulties.

According to Ur (1996), there are many factors that cause difficulty in speaking. On top of these came: Inhibition, students are worried about making mistakes; Nothing to say, students have no motive to express themselves; Low or uneven participation, only one participant can talk at a time because of large classes and the tendency of some learners to dominate; and mother-tongue use, learners who share the same mother tongue tend to use it because it is easier and because learners feel less exposed if they are speaking their mother tongue. Al-Lawati (1995) also found out that the linguistic domain (vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and discourse) constitutes the most serious area of difficulty. Ambu and Saidi, (1997) revealed that the huge number of students in the classroom, the insufficiency of the English teaching periods, and the syllabus that does not satisfy the learners' communicative needs are the main reasons for learners' speaking difficulties. They added that, because speaking is not tested, it is less emphasized by both teachers and students. This is consistent with Al-Lawati's (2002) findings in her study where students reported giving special attention to writing, reading, and listening tasks that are similar to exam items, but giving least attention to speaking tasks in the textbooks because speaking is completely excluded from exams.

1.1 Research Background

Teaching of English in Saudi Arabia has been changing and improving day by day. However, after studying English for 7 years the undergraduate students fail to acquire English language proficiency, hence unable to use it in the real life situations. University students are progressively required to share orally in lectures as part of their academic work. Mason (1995) found that there is a need for students to contribute orally in various ways in the lecture, to provide oral reports, and, generally to participate in a range of activities. This is especially challenging for Saudi students, as this participation requires a good command of speaking ability in the first place so that they can participate effectively. This is concurred with Al Hosni (2014) and Miles (2009) who stated that EFL learners need explicit instruction in speaking which, as any language skill, is generally has to be learned and practiced. They also indicated that oral language development has largely been neglected in the classroom, and most of the time, oral language in the classroom is used more by instructors than by students. However, oral language, even as used by the instructor, hardly ever functions as a means for students to gain knowledge and explore ideas. Al-Sibai (2004) points out that the use of English as a language in oral communication is, without a doubt, one of the most common but highly complex activities necessary to be considered when teaching the English language. This is because we live at a time where the ability to speak English fluently has become a must for those who want to advance in certain fields of human endeavor. Thompson (2003) and Dooley (2006) also highlighted the need for EFL instructors to help their students in processing information efficiently. Therefore, it is important to develop the necessary speaking abilities of English majors to encourage them to participate successfully in different communicative situations either in the classroom or in real life ones.

Based on the results of the pilot study and feedback gleaned from staff and students, it was apparent that the current listening and speaking course presented to English language majors at Buraydah Community College, Qassim University does not either reflect the learners' demands or help in developing their speaking abilities which are vital in their academic development and future career. The results also revealed that Saudi English majors' hesitancy to participate in oral discussion is mainly due to several factors associated with students,

instructors, curriculum, assessment techniques and use of mother tongue. Students are usually worried about pronunciation errors or their poor understanding of what they listen to due to lack of the necessary vocabulary items and fear of criticism. For these reasons they prefer not to speak to avoid such embarrassing situations. Although instructors value the importance of developing learners' speaking abilities, yet they couldn't spend enough efforts for that due to time constraints because priority is given to the coverage of the textbook topics. Also, lack of motivation, lack of native or native-like environment, strict student-teacher relationship, and low or uneven participation affect the development of the communicative use of English. The curriculum emphasizes teaching reading, writing and listening rather than speaking since it is the only skill that is not included in the exams. Many instructors believe that using the mother tongue is very necessary for teaching the foreign language to make sure that the learners understand the meaning. This results in minimizing the opportunities of foreign language use in the classroom being the only place where most students are exposed to English. Furthermore, when the specific communicative needs of a language program are not well defined, there is always a possibility of dissatisfaction in achieving its aims and objectives and the students will end up the language program without any proper language proficiency. As a result the effort of the policy makers, course designers, teachers and the learners will go wastage.

Thus, the authors are introducing Open Discussion Sessions as extracurricular activities to develop the communicative needs of the English language majors in Buraydah Community College, Qassim University. These activities are based mainly on providing a relaxed learning environment for learning and teaching the speaking skill. They allow learners' active involvement with real communicative situations with other students as well as with the instructors by giving enough attention to the factors that simplify the production of spoken language in a friendly environment. In addition, they put much emphasis on the teaching of the speaking skill by including it in the final exam. Consequently, the present study is an attempt to find out the learners' various communication needs from the perspective of both students and instructors so that they can be integrated into the speaking course. It also aims to help students gain the necessary speaking skills required to develop their communication abilities.

1.2 Research Questions

The present study sought answers to the following questions:

- 1) What are the perceived needs of English language Major Students in Buraydah Community College of Qassim University in terms of their speaking skills?
- 2) What are the features of a designed framework for Open Discussion Sessions based on students' needs?
- 3) To what extent does the use of Open Discussion Sessions lead students to perform better orally?

1.3 Hypotheses of the Study

The study attempted to verify the validity of the following hypotheses:

- 1) There are significant statistical differences between the mean scores of the English language majors at Buraydah Community College in pre and post-testing of the English speaking test in favor of post-testing.
- 2) The introduction of Open Discussion Sessions will enhance EFL learners' oral performance.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study is important as it investigates EFL students English language speaking skill needs to help them communicate effectively in a variety of oral situations. It may also provide EFL teachers with a specific language teaching techniques which they can use to enhance learners' oral performance, and to encourage students to maximize their communicative confidence by using English orally.

1.5 Objective of the Study

The present study assumes that communication is important for creating competent EFL speakers. It is very much similar to learning to ride a bike or learning to play an instrument and the best mode to learn these skills is by doing them, and not by just studying them or doing exercises and drills (Stryker & Leaver, 1997). Accordingly, the present study aims at:

- 1) Identifying the English language needs of English Major Students at Qassim University in Saudi Arabia.
- 2) Offering theoretical support for developing speaking abilities for English Major Students.
- 3) Presenting guidelines for Open Discussion Sessions for English Major Students.
- 4) Developing a framework for a speaking course for English Major Students based on their needs.

1.6 Delimitations of the Study

- 1) This study is intended to English language Majors at Buraydah Community College.
- 2) This study is devoted to the development of the English language speaking abilities and raising the self-confidence in doing so for the subjects of the study.

2. Method

The previous sections have focused on the theoretical and contextual aspect of the study as a whole. This section describes the research design, participants, instruments and data collection procedures. Data for the current study were collected quantitatively and qualitatively by means of a survey questionnaire, semi-structured interviews as well as a speaking test.

2.1 Research Design

The Present study used both the descriptive and the quasi-experimental approaches to achieve its desired goals. It is descriptive in nature based on its endeavor to obtain different ideas from EFL learners and instructors regarding identifying Buraydah Community College learners' English language speaking needs. It is also quasi-experimental since it seeks to study the effect of using Open Discussion Sessions on developing the speaking abilities of the EFL Learner-participants of the study.

2.2 Participants

2.2.1 The EFL Learner-Participants:

The EFL learner-participants were all the 4th level students at the English Language Program of Buraydah Community College, Qassim University. They were given a brief, informative oral overview of the nature and purpose of the study before implementing the questionnaire and participating in the Open Discussion Sessions. They have done six years of general English at the intermediate and high schools and two terms at the university. The overall number of the subjects is 35 male students divided into 5 groups (7 students each) and studying the same course.

2.2.2 The EFL Teacher-Participants:

A total of 11 EFL instructors, teaching working in Buraydah Community College, participated in the study. Four of them were non-native instructors from Saudi Arabia and Egypt, six were near-native from Pakistan and India, and the eleventh instructor was native from Britain. Five instructors were Ph.D. holders and six instructors had masters in English language and literature. They all have a rich teaching experience as EFL instructors ranging from 15-25 years and they are very much aware of Saudi EFL learners' needs.

2.3 Instruments

To successfully achieve the objectives of the study, three instruments were developed:

2.3.1 The Survey Questionnaire

This study developed a survey questionnaire as one of the data collection instruments which was adapted from questionnaires used in previous studies (Ferris, 1998; Dooley, 2006; Saidalvi, 2009; Kassim, 2010; Kaur & Clarke, 2009; Mennaai, 2013). The survey was designed to find out more about EFL learners' perceived speaking language needs. It was administered to a class of 35 EFL learners and 10 EFL instructors who did only the third part. The questionnaire is composed of (23) questions/items and it comprised four sections. The first part includes 8 questions and it focuses on collecting background details of the participants as well as information on self-assessment of their English language skills in general and the speaking skill in particular. The second part deals with the students' perception of the speaking skill as it demands them to select one or more alternatives from the 2 items given. The third part contains 13 items covering the important speaking sub-skills learners might need to learn. Before using this survey questionnaire, it was piloted to 20 third level students chosen randomly to test its reliability through the split-half method. These participants were asked to respond to the questionnaire items twice within a two-week interval. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient was used to estimate internal consistency of items. Alpha reliability estimate for the questionnaire was 0.839 which is a reasonably acceptable estimate to conduct the current study. The questionnaire was then submitted to a panel of five EFL specialists to validate its content in terms of its instructions and suitability to the objectives of the present study. Based on the results of the pilot study and the TEFL panel's comments and suggestions, the questionnaire was further polished and refined.

2.3.2 The Semi-Structured Interview

The purpose of the semi-structured interview was to obtain the students' and instructors' viewpoints and feedback about the effect of the Open Discussion Sessions on developing Buraydah Community College EFL learners' speaking abilities and developing their self-confidence when communicating with others. All participants were interviewed individually by the authors and the main points addressed dealt with the appropriateness of the proposed model for developing EFL learners' communicative abilities. The average time used for each interview ranged from 7- 10 minutes.

2.3.3 The Pre-Post Speaking Test

The purposes of the pre-post speaking test are to measure students' abilities to function in an English-speaking environment and see to what extent they have mastered the objectives of the study. Specifically, the examiners wanted to see how well how students can introduce themselves, give information on a given topic using appropriate language, communicate opinions on common experiences, organize their ideas coherently and speak fluently about a specific issue. Students were marked on four criteria of the speaking test descriptors: Knowledge, Presentation, Vocabulary and Fluency.

The speaking test was designed to take 10-14 minutes and consisted of an interview with two examiners to ensure objective and fair assessment. The speaking test was developed and adapted from a variety of sources (Fulcher, 1993; Fulcher & Reite, 2003; Tuan, 2012; Brown, 2000; Ducasse & Brown, 2011; Khamkhien, 2010). The test's reliability was analyzed using a split-half method measuring the coefficient of internal consistency by administering it to 20 level 3 EFL majors within a two-week interval. The split-test's coefficient result was 0.89 which indicated an acceptable level of reliability. The test was also validated by submitting it to a panel of EFL experts to decide the degree it is perceived to be doing what it is supposed to. The test was then modified to appear in four sections as follows:

Section 1: Each test taker is interviewed for two minutes during which he gives basic information about himself. The examiners ask each test taker five to seven questions.

Section 2: Each test taker is given one minute to read a 20-line paragraph silently before he reads it out loud in front of the examiners. The speaking time for each paragraph is 2–3 minutes.

Section 3: Each test taker is given one minute to read the instructions for the third task before he produces a monologue based on a textual prompt. The speaking time for each paragraph is 2–3 minutes.

Section 4: Each test taker is engaged in a dialogue with another test taker for three to four minutes based on a textual or pictorial prompt.

The overall score for the speaking test was 100 points divided evenly on the four sections.

3. The Open Discussion Sessions

In light of the results of the needs' assessment questionnaire, a frame work for Open Discussion Sessions was designed and featured as follows.

3.1 Aims

The Open Discussion Sessions, organized on weekly basis over a 15-week semester, were designed to develop students' oral communicative skills in general and speaking in particular. Specifically, it aimed at:

- 1) Improving students' ability to communicate with people in real life (not only in or out of class).
- 2) Developing students' confidence in different communicative contexts.
- 3) Enabling students to express their opinions and ideas in correct English.
- 4) Enhancing the students' ability to pronounce words appropriately.
- 5) Enabling students to organize their ideas coherently and speak fluently about a specific issue.
- 6) Enabling students to be better listeners.
- 7) Promoting self-learning and co-operative learning.
- 8) Sketching feasible topics in their daily learners' using English.

3.2 Content

The Open Discussion Sessions are extracurricular speaking activities designed in the form of a series of weekly meetings in a non-classroom setting and during an Activity Hour assigned for all the college students to practice non-classroom activities. These sessions represent a type of teamwork based on the principle that the knowledge,

ideas, and feelings of several members have great merit than those of a single individual. Each discussion session is intended to be a free give and take between teacher and students and among students on the current topic of concern in the course. It is characterized by probing questions from the teacher to elicit student interpretations, opinions, and questions. The session topics were chosen by the students and for the students. Topics covered a variety of subjects related to students' culture and education as follows:

Table 1. Topics of weekly sessions

| Week No. | Topic on interest | Week No. | Topic on interest |
|----------|--------------------|----------|------------------------|
| ONE | Sports | NINE | Tastes and Preferences |
| TWO | Movies & Media | TEN | Marriage |
| THREE | Movies & Media | ELEVEN | Ceremonies |
| FOUR | Culture | TWELVE | Dream Jobs |
| FIVE | Culture | THIRTEEN | Lifestyles |
| SIX | Learning Languages | FOURTEEN | Business and Money |
| SEVEN | Learning Languages | FIFTEEN | City Life |
| EIGHT | Travel | | |

3.3 Techniques

In a large tent in the college garden, similar to that which students use when they go for picnics in desert areas, subjects of the study were divided into five groups and each group was guided by an EFL instructor who is not usually the same every week. In the tent, students were seated on the ground in a way that allows them to face one another and not to make the teacher the focus of the group. Instructors usually prepare their students beforehand by providing them with appropriate materials and thought questions to guide their preparation. In one, the teacher gives students an opportunity to clarify content or ask for opinions on related topic. In the other, the teacher asks questions requiring specific knowledge of topic being discussed. In a discussion session, the students are actively involved in processing information and their needs and interests are dealt with more readily and spontaneously than in formal class settings.

A variety of techniques suitable for Open Discussion Sessions were employed. Co-operative and collaborative learning techniques were used throughout the sessions where students practiced English freely and confidently for oral communications purposes. The following techniques were used:

3.3.1 Student Groups

Students were divided into five groups and each group has seven students. Each and every group was monitored by an instructor. Those instructors were there to encourage students to use the English language rather than the Arabic language and to help students on topics if required. Apart from this job they were there as expert learners who are fluent and experienced enough to boost discussions.

3.3.2 Relaxed Environment

A clean place, large learning spaces, decorations and wall beautifications are very important elements to create a comfortable and relaxed environment for learners where they feel at home. As a “powerful motivator” for learning, during each session the special effort was put to offer the students a free and relaxed education setting void of worry of making mistakes or criticism and away of the traditional strict environment where they maintain the decorum and rules of formal classroom sittings. The major idea behind the stress-free environment is to give learners very informal and casual settings as they are used to. For this we created the environment for the students to feel their own habitat living. We allowed students to bring their own cultural eating stuff such as tea, coffee, pastry, patties, sweets etc.

3.3.3 Topic Distribution and Discussion

As mentioned above, the whole case study experiment was divided into 15 weeks. The topic for the each week was chosen by the students so there would be no compulsion or force on the students’ freedom. After the topic was decided students among themselves distributed the information of that topic and assign a team leader for the group just for a week. For every week they rotated the position of the team leader. In this way every student of that group got a chance to lead from the front and got experienced as a team leader.

3.3.4 Discussion Dynamics during Weekly Sessions

In each Open Discussion Session, the following pattern was adopted:

1) Each weekly session lasts for 50 minutes managed smoothly and systematically according to a specific time-plan. Each and every week before the topic was discussed by the students, there was an opening session speech or introduction of the topic by an instructor, other than those assigned to mentor the five student-groups. This instructor introduced the purpose of the speaking session to students, described the tactics of the session, answered students’ queries, and provided a list of the keywords students might need in their discussion. The time assigned to this opening session was only 10 minutes. Within this time frame, the instructor gave some information about the topic of the week.

2) After the introductory session the students were allowed to sit in their groups and start discussing the topic of the week. 25 minutes were given to each group and within this time they had to finish their discussion. The instructor’s role during this phase was limited to motivating students to be fully involved in the activity by asking questions occasionally, elaborating the discussion, helping students understand difficult concepts and encouraging them to ask questions if they do not understand the topic of discussion.

3) After they had finished their discussion, they all sat together for the final and bigger discussion of that topic. Once they were ready, the same topic of the week was discussed on the bigger and higher level. All the students communicated their opinions and thoughts about the pros and cons of that topic. This session was known as a summary and a conclusion session. Only 15 minutes were allotted for this session. In this session, the instructors were involved to share their personal experiences to give the insights of the topic, help students to relate relevant ideas and to arrive to the final conclusions but in no more than two minutes to give sufficient time to students. In this way, the 50-minute weekly session ended the topic for the upcoming week was decided.

3.3.5 Students’ Role and Teacher’s Role during Open Discussion Session

The Open Discussion Sessions create a constructivist learning environment in which students construct their own knowledge and become independent learners. Teachers who involve their students in free discussion activities also find their own role logically and naturally changing. Rather than being the task master, their primary tasks are to mentor students, ensure that the discussion is always on track, and boost students’ engagement without one individual dominating the meeting. They show their students how to ask questions, collect information, debate, discuss, take turn in discussion, give oral reports and develop life-long learning strategies. They become co-learners as their students embark on a variety of communicative situations. Thus, the teacher’s role during the discussion session is limited to that of an advisor, a mentor, a peer member of the group, a facilitator, and a consultant.

4. Findings

4.1 Results of the Survey Questionnaire

4.1.1 Part One: Background Information

The first part of the survey questionnaire aimed at collecting some demographic background information of the students which contributed to the overall picture of the scope of the English language Majors at Buraydah Community College. The demographic information provided by the students indicated that many of them had

been learning English for 6-7 years. The majority of the students (90%) rated their level in English as good. However, when students were asked to decide which of the four English language skills they are good at, the speaking skill ranked low in the list as it came last. Accordingly, 20% of them evaluated their level in the speaking skill as very good, 30% as good, while the other 50% rated their level as average. In addition, 85% of the students indicated that they feel nervous when they had to speak to EFL teachers, and 82% of them showed that they had less confidence in their speaking ability. These results would be consistent with problems associated with most EFL students who are usually affected by the factors discussed earlier in this paper that cause difficulty in speaking.

4.1.2 Part Two: Students' Perception of the Speaking Skill

In this part, students' perception of the speaking skill are dealt with. Students had to select one alternative for each of the four items given as shown in Tables 2-5 below.

Table 2. How often do you participate in oral discussion inside the classroom?

| Option | often | sometimes | rarely | never | total |
|--------|-------|-----------|--------|-------|-------|
| Number | 4 | 8 | 21 | 2 | 35 |
| % | 11.5 | 23 | 60 | 5.5 | 100 |

The above table shows that only 4 students often participate in class discussion, while the majority rarely do that. 60 % of the students expressed that they rarely had the chance to participate in oral discussion fluently and correctly due to a number of demotivating factors such as lack of risk taking, inhibition, the large number of students in class and the limited fifty-minute class time.

Table 3. How often do you use English in oral discussion outside the classroom?

| Option | often | sometimes | rarely | never | total |
|--------|-------|-----------|--------|-------|-------|
| Number | 1 | 2 | 30 | 2 | 35 |
| % | 3 | 5.5 | 86 | 5.5 | 100 |

The above table shows that 30 students making up 86% of the sample rarely use English outside the classroom. This means that students prefer to use their native Arabic language rather than the English language to interact with each other outside the classroom. This makes it very tough for them to speak English fluently for to learn a language well, students have to use it. This explains why they face many difficulties in their oral abilities. Students' are not to be blamed for this since they have a zero exposure to English medium environment or English-like environment and for this reason the authors were motivated to create a native-like environment through the introduction of weekly Open Discussion Sessions to offer the students the chance to use their English confidently in a relaxed educational environment.

4.1.3 Part Three: Communicative Needs of the Saudi English Majors

The third part of the survey questionnaire was designed to find out which speaking skills the students actually need to develop their oral communicative abilities. To do this participants of the study were required to provide responses to 13 questionnaire items using the Likert five-point scale. The weighted average of responses was calculated and the results were tabulated and presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Percentages and weighted averages of the participants' responses to part three of the needs assessment questionnaire

| Communicative Needs of the Saudi English Majors | | weighted average | average Students | Weighted average teachers | Rank order total |
|---|---|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1 | Asking the teacher or other students questions about common experience. | 2.70 | 3.10 | 2.90 | 13 |
| 2 | Giving instructions for other students in English. | 3.47 | 3.73 | 3.60 | 12 |
| 3 | Organize ideas coherently when communicating with others. | 4.23 | 4.37 | 4.30 | 8 |
| 4 | Sharing thoughts with other classmates. | 4.36 | 4.30 | 4.33 | 7 |
| 5 | Describing objects from a picture or chart. | 3.63 | 3.73 | 3.68 | 11 |
| 6 | Improving realistic conversations about common topics. | 3.73 | 3.93 | 3.83 | 10 |
| 7 | Communicating effectively with EFL instructors in or out of class. | 4.37 | 4.33 | 4.35 | 6 |
| 8 | Participating successfully in class discussion. | 4.30 | 4.80 | 4.55 | 5 |
| 9 | Giving oral presentation. | 4.00 | 4.50 | 4.25 | 9 |
| 10 | Expressing opinions orally in correct English. | 4.60 | 4.66 | 4.63 | 2 |
| 11 | Participating in oral group conversation with English speaking people. | 4.67 | 4.47 | 4.57 | 4 |
| 12 | Developing confidence in different communicative contexts. | 4.47 | 4.73 | 4.60 | 3 |
| 13 | Communicate with people in real life (not only in or out of class). | 4.73 | 4.67 | 4.70 | 1 |

The cut-score point found for the participants' responses is 3.8 which shows a great extent of similarities in their views regarding the speaking skills needed by the English language Majors in Buraydah Community College. Priority was given to ten needs out of thirteen included in the second part of the questionnaire. On top of these, come the need to communicate with people in real life (not only in or out of class), express opinions orally in correct English, develop confidence in different communicative contexts, participate in oral group conversation with English speaking people, participate successfully in class discussion and share ideas and opinions with EFL instructors or with other students.

4.2 Results of the Pre-post Speaking Test

The pre-post speaking test was designed to show the comparison of the oral communicative abilities of Buraydah Community College English language majors before and after using the Open Discussion Sessions as shown in Table 5 below.

Table 5. Means and (t) value of the experimental group scores in the pre-post testing

| Administration | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | T | DF | Tab. T | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|----------------|----|-------|----------------|--------|----|--------|-----------------|
| Pre | 35 | 19.43 | 2.693 | 13.247 | 34 | 1.697 | 0.01 |
| Post | 35 | 69.76 | 0.471 | | | | |

As displayed in the table above, there are significant statistical differences between the mean scores of the English language majors at Buraydah Community College in pre and post testing in favor of post-testing. Obviously, calculated "t" (13.247) is higher than tabulated "t" (1.697) at the degree of freedom (34) and this is significant at 0.01 level. This proves the validity of the first research hypothesis "There are significant statistical differences between the mean scores of the English language majors at Buraydah Community College in pre and post-testing of the English speaking test in favor of post-testing". These results indicate that students demonstrated improved performances in their communicative abilities after participating in Open Discussion Sessions as shown in Figure 1 below.

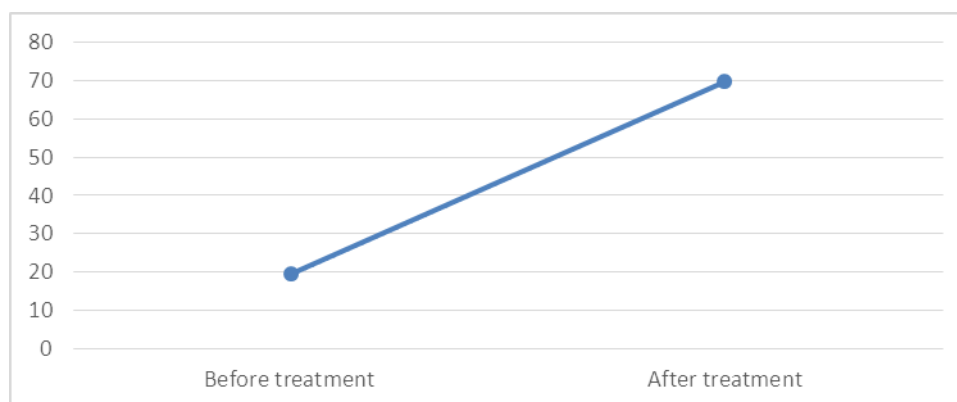


Figure 1. Development in speaking skill

The above figure shows the development in the sample group's ability of the English communicative speaking skill before and after participating in the Open Discussion Sessions.

4.3 Results of the Semi-structured Interviews

The purpose of the semi- structured interviews was to find out about students' and instructors' views towards the effect of Open Discussion Sessions on enhancing learners' speaking abilities. Students had strong positive assessments for the usefulness of Open Discussion Sessions based on several motives. First, the discussion sessions were appropriate for their abilities, needs and level. Accordingly, it promoted their English communicative speaking skill. Second, the discussions offered them valuable opportunities for oral participation since they were divided into small groups of seven students each and each group had an instructor as a mentor. In addition, they never felt bored with the discussion activities that were carried out in a casual, supportive, friendly, stimulating and witty learning environment enhancing good relationship with themselves and with the instructors. Students were very much impressed by the motivating attitudes of their EFL instructors who guided the discussions that went smoothly and were not hindered by instructors who never interrupted students to correct their mistakes. On the contrary, instructors were there to invite and stimulate students to speak. Students said that they were satisfied in the different activities they performed in the discussion sessions that encouraged them to be talkative rather than silent in classes. Finally, students emphasized the effective role of the sessions on enhancing their self-confidence that enabled them to talk in front of their colleagues and instructors.

Students' comments corroborate those from the EFL instructors who believed that all students had increased their ability to use English. They emphasized that Open Discussion Sessions were very interesting and enjoyable experience for both students and instructors as they were less talkative and acted as guides to the groups rather than controllers. The speaking abilities of students dramatically increased since their needs and interests were clearly identified and the method for fulfilling those needs were more innovative. The contents in the discussion sessions, as a process of taking a topic and studying all relevant data with an objective to reach a shared understanding of that topic, enabled students to gain knowledge of a variety of topics. Students were actively engaged in generating and exchanging information and ideas, and students had become confident and brave enough to communicating orally in English since they had the chance to build rapport with the other individuals in the group. Instructors added that the discussion sessions helped students to think critically about what they are learning as it allowed them to have direct impact upon their learning as their suggestions were heard and often implemented. Another important strengths is that students were having hands-on experience and could use their speaking abilities in their daily interactions with instructors and fellows.

However, participants of the study expressed a unanimous opinion that one hour each week was not enough for improving an important skill like speaking. They explained that they usually felt rushed to say what they wanted to because they only had fifty minutes for the discussion. Participants also described how crosstalks served as distractions during discussions. Concerns were also raised for lack of providing orientation on Open Discussion Sessions as an effective teaching/learning strategy. Students' should have been oriented on learning using Open Discussion Sessions to adapt their behavior patterns. Sub-groups were not decided according to students' level, and speaking time was not distributed among members of each group. Therefore, some students were discouraged in the presence of someone who appeared to speak a lot for he knew so much. In addition, the discussion environment allowed a few individual students to dominate the conversation. There were always

chances for getting off the topic and although it was possible for instructors to redirect the discussion back on track, valuable time was lost and student's focus on the subject matter was distracted. Finally, Open Discussion Sessions demanded good preparation of proper material and implementation required more instructor's workload.

Suggestions focused on providing a training sessions to students on how to engage in fruitful discussions and work as a member of a large group or a sub-group in discussion session; establishing a time when students may not speak a second time until everyone else has spoken; setting up sub-groups in light of students' speaking abilities so that high contributors work together and low contributors work together; reducing class size so that individual voices can be heard; using Open Discussion Sessions in conjunction with other methods to maximize its usefulness; and incorporating visual cues like videos to enhance students' interactivity and participation. Suggestions also emphasized the need to extend the Open Discussion Sessions outside the college borders through using Social Network Sites such as Skype. These sites could, to a great extent, solve the problem of time constraints and assist the low proficiency or shy learners to build their confidence in using the target language orally and improve their speaking ability as well as discussion skills.

5. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore learners' various communication needs to help them gain the necessary speaking skills required to develop their speaking abilities. It is the authors belief that identifying and meeting EFL learners' needs should be an important planning and decision-making process in the entire development of learners' language abilities in general and speaking ability in particular. This view is emphasized by Kaur and Clarke (2009), Dick, et al. (2004) and Kassim and Ali (2010) who considered needs identification momentous for improving learners' excitement for learning and for preparing them to become active and effective learners for life. Similarly, Moslehifar and Ibrahim (2012), Dooley (2006) and McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) found out that in identifying learners' learning needs, those learners becomes partners in their teaching. They can feel a sense of personal, active engagement with the material, rather than a passive, just show up kind of class.

The analysis of the needs assessment questionnaires revealed that students' level in the English language Speaking skill is the least among other skills and that very few students participate in oral discussions in-or- out of the classroom. Therefore, the majority of the students showed a great interest to develop their English speaking abilities in a way that enables them to communicate with people in real life. The authors introduced a framework for meeting learners' speaking needs based on a series of Open Discussion Sessions presented in a relaxed learning environment. These sessions enabled instructors, who acted as facilitators rather than controllers, to create a friendly encouraging learning setting, void of worry of making mistakes, to push the students to participate in different non-classroom speaking activities. This relaxed learning mode allowed students to avoid anxiety and unwillingness during the English speaking process which Dil (2009), Al Hosni (2014), Yang (2010) and D. AL-Jamal and G. Al-Jamal (2014) considered as two of the biggest obstacles for EFL learners. Administration of speaking test had a considerable effect on motivating students to put speaking on equal foot of importance as other subjects of study. This result corroborate those of Ambu and Saidi (1997), Kang (1997), Al-Lawati (2002) and Tuan (2012) who revealed that speaking is not emphasized as it is not included in exams.

Results of the pre-post speaking test and semi –structured interviews with learners and instructors exposed the significant effect of the Open Discussion Sessions on developing learners speaking abilities a long with improving their self-confidence to use the language. In line with this finding, Safari and Koosha (2016), Alyan (2013), Gan (2012) and Tharp and Gallimore (1988), found discussion sessions as useful teaching techniques for developing the speaking skill and modifying learners' roles. During discussions, learners were active participants rather than passive recipients of information. This study is also consistent with Maley and Duff (2005), Jaihar (2013) and CheeKeong et al., (2014) who found out that relaxation plays a significant role on developing learners' confidence in using the language and reducing tension to the minimum. The study also highlighted the importance of providing a native-like environment for enhancing speaking abilities as stressed by Bakar et al., (2013) and Kayum (2015). In addition, this study found that students were more interested in joining discussions activities and they had fun in doing those activities. This result was supported by Mennaai (2013), Prisana & Kerdpol (2015), Rahman et al., (2011) and Thepsuriwong (2014) who emphasized the development of the speaking skill by discussion activities.

Small group size of seven students was also found as a significant factor affecting students' oral communicative ability as it allowed them more time to practice the language in a native-like environment. This finding is consistent with those of Litticharoenporn (2014), Beebe and Masterson (2003), Davis (1993), Farr (2003) and Csernica et al., (2002) who found larger groups decrease each member's opportunity to participate and often

results in some members not actively contributing to the group. They believed that a small group, being an important component of group work, is often considered to consist of three or more people. They suggested that groups of four or five members tend to work best. Similarly, Wright and Lawson (2005) small group size helped students feel that the class was smaller and thus promoted active learning in a large class environment. However, very few studies (Burke, 2011; Beebe & Masterson 2003; Freeman & Greenacre, 2011) found group discussions as less effective teaching strategy as there is always a risk of group members who are overly dominant, who contribute too little, or who fail to participate effectively. Open Discussion sessions need time and personnel to organize facilities and groups. In addition, students and instructors sometimes see discussion commitments as an added burden to their regular duties and workloads.

All in all, the study shows that speaking extracurricular activities were useful part of education that provide positive gains for students. They were useful for improving learners' communicative oral abilities and developing life-long relationships with their peers and instructors. This is due to increased self-confidence and better time management. Similar findings were found in Massoni (2011), Tenhouse (2003), Eccles, et al. (2003) and Gerber (1996) who concluded that students must be encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities like debate and group discussion to help assist in learning useful new skills such as time management, critical thinking, teamwork and social skills. They added that exposing students to such activities might help lessen the mental tension and stress of studying for a short period of time.

6. Conclusion

Improving learners' speaking skills nowadays is not an easy job for teachers. The limitations of time and the obligation to finish certain materials really inhibit teachers' creativities. One effective way to resolve this problem is by providing speaking extracurricular activities. Speaking is one of the central elements of communication that needs special attention and instruction. The collected results show that identification of learners' needs that involves both student and instructors informants should be in the heart of educationists' attention when planning English language speaking courses to obtain a balanced view. Open Discussion Sessions were viewed as an effective method to develop students' speaking skill since it provided a relaxed learning environment void of fear or worry about making mistakes. This learning environment encouraged students' participation, promoted self-confidence, prepared students for real-life communication and gave them opportunity to practice the speaking skill. Finally, the study opens up the opportunity for other researchers to explore the possible impact of Open Discussion Sessions on a national scale, incorporating videos and other interactive components, allowing for diverse gender and broader geographic populations.

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